

DICTION & DESCRIPTION: types, purposes, and power of words

In order to build your English vocabulary and learn to use words purposefully and powerfully, you must first understand some basic issues: the different kinds of English words, resources that can help you expand your vocabulary in a meaningful way, how to choose the right words with the best meanings, the importance of making the most effective and efficient word choices as possible. Knowing this stuff will improve your writing greatly because you'll be able to convey your meaning as concisely, directly, and convincingly as possible and gain the respect and trust of your audience (readers). Careful, attentive, purposeful diction is one of the foundations of successful, persuasive writing.

TYPES OF WORDS: learn to choose words wisely and appropriately

While you may not think much about types of words when you are writing a first or even second draft, you definitely want to think carefully about your word choices—the effects of different types of words on readers, which types are most appropriate for the assignment, and how to balance different kinds of words successfully—when you revise. Below I have listed, explained, and given examples of the major categories of English words you should know.

Monosyllabic vs. Multisyllabic Words

In other words, one-syllable words vs. words with many syllables. Lots of one-syllable words can make your writing sound more direct, clear, and personal. Lots of multisyllabic words make your writing sound more intellectual and formal. So, you need to ask yourself how personal/informal or intellectual/formal do you want to sound? Here are some examples to illustrate the difference in a writer's "voice" when he/she uses mono vs. multi syllable words:

MULTI: The respite from study was devoted to a sojourn at the ancestral mansion.

MONO: I spent my vacation at the house of my grandparents.

MULTI: The visitor proved a harbinger of glad things.

MONO: The visitor brought good news.

MULTI: I endeavored to peruse the voluminous historical manuscript on the populous city of Cairo.

MONO: I tried to read the book on Cairo.

Specific vs. General Words

Specific words refer to *particular persons, places, or events*: Martin Luther King, Jr., Manhattan, New York City, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. General words, on the other hand, refer to *groups or classes*: civil rights activists, a big city, competitive sports, athletes. General words are necessary to explain things in a basic way and to make statements (generalizations). Specific words are the ones that give your writing interest and power—they bring the generalizations to life through details—and make your writing sound more informed and convincing. Too many of either kind of word can cause problems, though. Too many general words can cause your writing to be unclear and boring, causing your reader to ask *What do you mean? Can you give me an example?* Too many specific words (details) can cause your reader to get bored, confused, and frustrated—as well as miss your point completely—if you focus on too many details that don't help to explain meaning or importance of what you're writing about. Here are some examples:

GENERAL: The dog jumped on top of the car.

SPECIFIC: The Saint Bernard jumped on top of the red corvette.

GENERAL: She lives in a big city.

SPECIFIC: Sarah lives by Central Park in Manhattan, New York City.

Concrete vs. Abstract Words

Concrete words are ones that *can be perceived by our senses*: sound, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Abstract words refer to *things that we cannot detect with our senses*—things like qualities, beliefs, ideas, and characteristics that have no physical being/form. The more abstract writing is, the harder it is to understand. (Abstract language is most often used when writers address highly educated audiences, such as when a PhD-level professor of English writes a journal article for an audience of other English professors critiquing a theory.) Abstract words are words like *love, success, freedom, good, moral, democracy, responsibility, disrespect, outrage*, and any *-ism* (*chauvinism, Communism, feminism, racism, sexism*). Because concrete words refer to things we can actually see, hear, smell, taste, and feel, their meanings are pretty stable and definite; therefore, they

make your writing more physical, exact, and descriptive. Examples of concrete words include *spoon, earring, hot, walking, cold, flat, green, curly, tall, bitter, sweet, rain, humid*, etc. To illustrate the difference, if you asked me what I mean by the word “pen,” I could pick up a pen and show it to you. But if you asked me what I mean by the word “intelligent,” I couldn’t show you any object to help me explain the meaning; instead, I would have to try to explain the *idea* or *concept* of intelligence. You want concrete words when painting a picture for your reader is important and abstract words when you want to express ideas and generalizations; in other words, abstract words *tell* while concrete words *show*.

ABSTRACT: Even a large male gorilla, unaccustomed to tourists, is frightened by people.
CONCRETE: A 400-lb male gorilla, who is accustomed to tourists, will pee himself with fright and bolt into the forest to hide at the mere sight of a human.

ABSTRACT: My brother is handsome.
CONCRETE: My brother “looks Dutch” with his translucent blond hair, vivid blue eyes, high cheekbones, and height of 6 feet and 4 inches.

Literal vs. Figurative Language

When words are used in a literal way, their meanings do not deviate from the technical, basic dictionary definition. When words are used figuratively, however, they are given new meanings—figurative language is all about creating new meanings and presenting surprising and unusual comparisons. Idioms are good examples of figurative language.

COMPARISONS... Both literal and figurative language can be used to make comparisons. In literal comparisons, the two things being compared can logically be placed or looked at side by side and analyzed; for example, *Private colleges are smaller in size than public universities* and *The diamond in my engagement ring is way bigger than the diamond in yours* are literal comparisons. Figurative comparisons include *similes* and *metaphors*—a simile compares two things using the words “like” or “as” and a metaphor implies comparisons and does not use “like” or “as.” For example, “My dad is like a grumbling bear in the morning” is a simile while “My father is a grumbling bear in the morning” is a metaphor. Examples of similes are *These cookies taste like garbage* or *That man is as old as the universe itself*. Examples of metaphors are *My generation is living on fast-forward without a pause button* or *Her home is a prison, her bedroom a prison cell*. Figurative language makes surprising, delightful, and unusual comparisons between unlike things, and figurative language can add a lot of meaning, power, and beauty to a piece of writing.

OTHER FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE... Figurative language also refers to *hyperbole* and *personification*, which are not necessarily comparisons. A hyperbole is a statement of exaggeration and is often meant to be humorous: *In order to get my assignment done, I'll have to burn the midnight oil* or *When my husband forgets to shave, by 4:00 pm he transforms into a sasquatch*. Personification is when something nonhuman is given human-like qualities; personification is used to create more vivid descriptions. *The leaves danced in the cold late-October wind* or *I hadn't noticed that Fate had quietly slipped on its boxing gloves and stepped into the ring, ready to kick the ass of my best-laid plans* are examples of personification.

BE SPECIFIC: how *not* to bore your reader to death...

Most of us know and use a very limited number of words/vocabulary when we speak and when we write. These are basic, common nouns like teacher, student, individual, person; common verbs like talk, walk, drive, say, love; and boring, overused adjectives and adverbs like amazing, pretty, nice, sweet, and really and very. The best and most beautiful and meaningful and famous writing avoids these boring, overused words as much as possible and instead uses much more specific nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that communicate precise meanings and detail that add interest, life, beauty, and uniqueness to a piece of writing. See the examples below for an illustration of specificity in word choices.

ORIGINAL SENTENCE: “The woman pet the dog.”

NOUNS. What image comes to your mind when you see the word “woman”? Probably none at all—that’s because “woman” is a vague, unspecific noun. How about the word “dog”? Same thing, right? Think about it: you’d feel quite differently about the woman if I used a more specific and descriptive noun like “businesswoman” or “young mother” or “old hag.” Likewise, “dog” calls up quite a different mental image if I change it to a “Pekinese” or “pitbull” or “boxer” or “her

faithful French bulldog." Always be specific when you name things. And be sure to pay attention to the mental images each name creates.



VERBS. "Pet" is okay for communicating the simple, basic action, but "stroked," "tousled," or "caressed" are a lot better and more specific: these communicate the long, slow movement of a hand across a dog's fur from head to rump ("stroked"), the action of holding the dog's head in your hands and vigorously rubbing it ("tousled"), and very softly and lovingly moving your fingers across the dog's fur while barely touching it ("caressed"). When you write descriptive verbs, go for the unexpected. For example, how do we feel about a hag who gently caresses the French bulldog at her feet? The businesswoman who tousles a mutt's ears when no one is looking? The young mother who strokes her goofy boxer while watching TV? When you show rather than tell, use verbs that communicate more than just a basic action.

ADJECTIVES. Adjectives add a lot to one's writing because their whole purpose is to provide descriptions. We could improve the sentence above (original sentence) by asking ourselves questions. Is the woman beautiful? What kind of mood is she in? Is her hand shaking? Is the dog ugly? Is it big/small? Is the dog growling or whimpering? The grouchy, insufferable old hag who caresses her wee, whimpering French bulldog lovingly is much different than the strikingly beautiful young mother who lovingly strokes her huge, slobbery, goofy boxer as she smiles softly. From the basic original sentence of "The woman pet the dog," we now have sentences that are much more meaningful and interesting.

ADVERBS. Adverbs, on the other hand, should be used sparingly—especially the "empty" adverbs like *really* and *very* that are way too over used in our speaking and writing (so much so that they have almost lost any meaning at all). Adverbs are meant to clarify meanings of verbs; however, if you choose strong verbs in the first place, you won't even need adverb at all. A few well-placed adverbs can help to create a scene, so don't avoid using them. Just do your best to choose better verbs in the first place and let your strong verbs create meaning instead of relying on adverbs to create meaning. For example, I could write that the businesswoman pet her mutt very happily and energetically. A much better version of this sentence, in which I exchange strong verbs for adverb-verb combinations, might be something like this: The businesswoman accosts her shabby little mutt with wild adoration upon arriving home each evening.

EXAMPLE DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH: generalizations vs. specific detail, *showing not telling*

Kota and I, my dog and me—there is not one without the other when it comes to my furry companion. Kota—a menacing looking, powerful 120-lb boxer-mastiff mix with the gentlest touch and sweetest heart ever bestowed on a canine—has tethered herself to me by an invisible leash of dutiful companionship. I cannot go where she cannot follow, even if my destination is simply the second floor of my home. This is where my office is and where I spend most mornings when the house is still quiet and sleepy. As I turn the mangled, chewed-on doorknob and pull the door open to reveal the steep and treacherous staircase leading to my sanctuary, a cold, wet nose presses on the back of my calf and warm, moist breath cascades around my ankles; it is Kota, at my heels, who is eager and determined to accompany me to the top of the steps. She tags along close behind as I ascend, stroll over to my desk, and begin my work day once again. I plop ungracefully down onto my chair, flip my computer open, and begin tapping letters into words, my fingers dancing swiftly across the keyboard. The tapping of keys on the keyboard tells Kota that I will be here for a while at my office-chair perch, but she sits erect and at attention for a few minutes nonetheless, studying me until she is satisfied that I will in fact stay put. Only then, she wanders about until, slowly and delicately, she lifts one paw at a time onto the plush orange sofa, languidly climbing into position. She pauses; looks at me; rotates in tiny, lethargic circles atop her long, shaking legs; pauses; looks at me; suddenly plunks her tail-less rump with a soft *thud*; pauses; looks at me; groans loudly and yawns a massive yawn; pauses; looks at me; and finally—seemingly just seconds later—begins to snore, jowls flapping softly with each exhale. There she stays until her eyes snap open the second the faint pitter-patter of my fingertips on the keyboards comes to a halt. Fixing her gaze on me, she is ready to leap off the sofa and does so at the mere suggestion that I'm about to push back my chair and rise. I feel her breath at my heels once again as we descend—my sidekick and me—into the living room, through the kitchen, and into the bathroom, where she lazes

on a pile of laundry while I shower and get ready for the day, and finally to the front door where I exit the house to go to work and know I will find her waiting patiently for me to once again make our duo complete when I return home in the evening.